



L. W. HOFFECKER
President of the A. N. A., 1939-1941.

Go tell it on the Franklin Mountains ... L.W. HOFFECKER IS REBORN!

PART 1 OF 4

BY JASON ELWELL

INTRODUCTION

In our hobby of numismatics, it is easy to accept what has always been written. Those before us are supposed to go through a long, hard road of investigation to put out the best information possible. This is the path of scholarly work. We numismatists depend on this research to better understand our hobby. This is how we build our knowledge base. This is how we teach future numismatists.

With that said, discoveries are constantly being made. These discoveries have the power to change public perception, fill gaps of missing information, and reshape what we know. Sometimes findings can be controversial. Think about the first time you heard that dinosaurs had feathers or that Pluto was not the 9th planet (that one went back and forth).

Recently, such a discovery has been made in Texas. Atop the second floor of an old carriage house, waiting to be found like a lost Pharaoh of Egypt, laid the last records of the late Lyman William Hoffecker (1868-1955). For those not familiar with this name, Hoffecker is the creator of the 1935 Old Spanish Trail half dollar (or as locals call it, the El Paso half dollar).

My goal is to clear this good man's name once and for all with a series of articles backed by newly discovered documents.

By writing this series, I will: (a) share how I acquired this newly discovered information, (b) address comments about the Old Spanish Trail half dollar and its creation, (c) give credit to Hoffecker's eye witness account inside the San Francisco Mint while exposing unfair treatments he experienced in his last days (a real eye opener), and (d) acknowledge the many good works of L.W. Hoffecker and why

us numismatists should be thanking him for doing so much in our hobby. My hope is that you, the reader, will keep an open mind and will form your own conclusion after all the facts have been presented. Now, let me explain how I acquired these newly discovered documents.

WHY THAT HOUSE?

To tell you how I came to be in possession of the last records of L.W. Hoffecker, I must go back some 20 years to when I first moved to El Paso, Texas.

When I first settled in El Paso, I wanted to see as much of this "new-to-me" city as I could. It seemed that around every corner of this borderland town there was some story of Pancho Villa or some legend of Oñate's lost gold. As an inquisitive person, I would often drive the El Paso City Historic District and take in the beauty of all the homes.

Strangely enough, I would look just a little bit longer at this one abandoned-looking house resting inside the edge of the historic district. Located at 1514 Montana Avenue, I was amazed by the size and presence of the house. Driving by, I would always wonder what the story was behind this house. I thought it such a shame the house was not restored to its former glory. Built in 1904, the Hoffecker house has neo-classic design and massive Greek Ionic pillars at its entrance. These great columns, standing wide and tall, make their presence known. Unfortunately, this home seemed like it was an empty shell of its former self.

Time goes on and I joined the International Coin Club of El Paso, Inc. (ICCOEP). I've been a coin collector most of my life, but didn't even know coin

clubs existed. I had always thought coin collecting was a solitary thing and not so much a social event. Taking a deep dive into local numismatics, I realized that it was a lot of fun connecting the local stories with actual numismatic items. I began collecting medals and tokens of the El Paso / Juarez borderland region and documented my findings. John Grost, a big El Paso collector, inspired me to go in this direction. His way of taking something so simple like a "good for" token and telling a story about it was a real eye opener to me. I must add, I also really enjoyed hearing about the local lore from long-time club member Willie Terazzas.

One day at an ICCOEP general meeting, club member Barbara Angus did a presentation on L.W. Hoffecker and The Old Spanish Trail half dollar (You can read her article in the TNA News June 2020 issue.). She explained how the coin was connected to El Paso and provided sources on why this coin was intrinsic to the creation of the first public museum in El Paso. As Barbara worked for many years at one of the local museums, this history of the Old Spanish Trail half was a personal passion of hers. During the presentation, a picture of Hoffecker's house went on the screen. My jaw about dropped. That was the house I had been admiring for many years. The



Hoffecker House in present day



The Old Spanish Trail Commemorative Half Dollar championed by L. W. Hoeffcker

house that I wished I could own, but short of winning a lottery would never be able to acquire. After the meeting I approached Barbara. We talked all things Hoeffcker and the Old Spanish Trail half dollar. As I could only tell her about my experiences admiring the home, I did more listening, but enjoyed every minute discussing Hoeffcker, the house at 1514 Montana, and the Old Spanish Trail half.

More time goes by, and COVID becomes a thing. It's a dark time as everyone self-isolates, but the situation gives me a chance to adjust the final layout of my first edition book Numismatics of the Borderland. As I had been doing research on borderland numismatics, I thought it was best to publish my findings. I found a lot of great information connecting Hoeffcker to borderland history and, of course, his half dollar. Some Hoeffcker articles felt darker in nature, and I felt like I found what in today's world might be considered "Fake News." Dictionary.com defines Fake News as: false news stories, often of a sensational nature, created to be widely shared or distributed for the purpose of generating revenue, or promoting or discrediting a public figure, political movement, company, etc.

Now, let's be clear! I'm not saying that other articles written about L.W. Hoeffcker are wrong or right. Everyone has the right to share creative works in the writing process. However, after extensive research, my opinion is that most articles about L.W. Hoeffcker are opinion-oriented with a loose peppering of facts. That being said, most articles felt like they were attacking Hoeffcker's character, his business, and even the coin itself. It also felt like the provided facts were taken out of context or twisted to a certain viewpoint to sell the news (Don Henley's song "Dirty Laundry" comes to mind).

In reading the many articles, I would also review the bibliographies. It's in the source material that I noticed a pattern. Most articles tended to share the same few references. This might explain why certain viewpoints about the Old

Spanish Trail half dollar and L.W. Hoeffcker have become the accepted standard in our numismatic community. Unfortunately, it also showed how little new research has been published.

In discussing Old Spanish Trail half dollars, both Numismatic Art in America by Cornelius Vermule (Vermule III) and Commemorative Coins of the United States: A Complete Encyclopedia by David Q. Bowers are often sought as go-to sources for classic commemorative coins. In my research, these two books were among those listed in the many articles about the Old Spanish Trail half dollar.

It seems apparent that Vermule let his true feelings be known on paper, stating that L.W. Hoeffcker's Old Spanish Trail half dollar "smacks of such amateurishness", amongst other things. Bowers' book uses phrases like "a cozy arrangement" and "Hoeffcker dreamed up the scheme" to seemingly express his own narrative. Also, Bowers' book makes the accusation that a letter written by L.W. Hoeffcker's dying wife, Sara, was not true, stating "Mrs. Hoeffcker's 1954 statement was false."

For context, on February 27, 1954, Sara Hoeffcker wrote a letter to B. Max Mehl stating, "In reference to the Old Spanish Trail half dollars, we only had 12 of these coins and Mr. Hoeffcker decided to keep them for his grandchildren and great grandchildren, as the coins will mean more to them than the money would mean to him." Unfortunately, Sara Hoeffcker would die six months after writing that letter to Mehl (August 13, 1954). Bowers' book then tries to connect Sara's letter to a February 1987 Superior Galleries L.W. Hoeffcker estate sale, in which 63 Old Spanish Trail half dollars were offered to the public.

By providing cross-examination, to say that "Mrs. Hoeffcker's statement was

false" feels like an overreach. By accepting that Old Spanish Trail coins sold in 1987 amount to nothing more than roughly 3 half-dollar rolls, that Spanish Trail coins had been given to family as keepsakes at least once, and that surviving husband L.W. Hoeffcker continued to buy and sell many coins until his own death (January 13, 1955) provides more than enough evidence to support Sara's statements in her 1954 letter to Mehl as truth! (*More on this to come in Part 2.*)

Coincidentally, while comparing Bowers' research to my own, a reminder of the fanatical Cadaver Trial of Pope Formosus had come to mind. For numismatists unaware, the Cadaver Trial of Pope Formosus was an outlandish trial in which the dead body of Pope Formosus was removed from the grave and ordered to appear before the courts and stand trial. However unsettling, this trial really did take place.

Now it must be said that these books are an important asset to any numismatic library, but in my opinion, they do not tell the whole story about the Old Spanish Trail half dollar nor about L.W. Hoeffcker, or even his wife. Applying critical thinking, it became more important than ever to use original source material in my work.

At this point in my life, I had been living in El Paso for almost 15 years and spent the bulk of my time learning and reading everything borderland related (newspapers.com is a great resource). I also did many hikes across this region's desert terrain and dedicated much time to the ICCOEP cause. I mention this because, if you live and breathe the history and culture that is El Paso, Texas, you too would feel that those who wrote negative remarks don't really know anything about El Paso, L.W. Hoeffcker, nor comprehend the importance of the Old Spanish Trail (El Paso) half dollar in this borderland community. I also would like to state that it was easy to find new information and make other conclusions that would overrule the most unsettling statements. (If you are looking for a newer, unbiased fact-based reference book on classic commemoratives, give Anthony J. Swiatek's Encyclopedia of the Commemorative Coins of the United



States: History, Art, Investment & Collection of America's Memorial Coinage (2012) a read. I find it to be a better, more up to date resource.)

A LETTER TO THE HOUSE ... THE HOUSE RESPONDS!

In October of 2024, I decided to find out who owned the Hoffecker house. I drafted up a letter to the house and placed it in the outgoing mail. I don't know what possessed me to do it. Maybe it was half curiosity and maybe half hoping there was new things to learn. It being October, maybe it was ol' Hoffecker himself reaching from beyond the grave. Whatever the case, a response never came. I didn't expect one, but figured it was worth a shot.

In February of 2025, a couple named John and Naomi Falvey approached my booth at the El Paso Coin Show (what a neat couple). They saw my book prominently displaying the Old Spanish Trail half dollar on its cover. Simultaneously they looked at each other and then at me. They both remarked "You wrote the letter!" At first, I wasn't sure what they were referencing, but then it clicked – the Hoffecker house!

Apparently, this couple had acquired the Hoffecker house about the same time I had sent my letter. They had just as many questions for me as I did for them. The couple began talking about the two separate safes built into the property. One safe was built into the basement of the main house. Another safe was built atop the second floor of the carriage house located at the back of the property. I explained that Hoffecker was a coin collector, coin dealer, President of the American Numismatic Association, and the designer/distributor of the Old Spanish Trail half dollar. The Falvey's then told me that as they were clearing out the carriage house for remodeling and storage, they found a bunch of old documents tucked away. At first, the husband thought that he might cut off some of the stamps and see if there was any value. The couple had also thought it might be easier to just toss the records and focus on the bigger project: remodeling the house. For whatever reason they kept them...and then they received my letter. While we talked, I gave the couple a copy of my book in hopes they would want to learn more about Hoffecker and El Paso's numismatic history. I did explain that my book held only a short chapter on Hoffecker, but it contained great information connected to the house. I also told them that I hoped to provide more information in a future second edition book. The couple then remarked that the files

were just taking up space in their house and that the records needed to go somewhere. Then they asked me, "Would you want the files?" and of course I said "YES!"

In March 2025, my wife and I met the couple again at the Hoffecker house. There, the new owners gave us a tour of the entire property. As the Falvey's were in the middle of reconstruction, most of the home's interior walls had been stripped to bare framing. We were escorted through the many levels of the home. I saw where the bowling alley once stood (now removed) on the basement level and imagined how it stretched into the back yard. I saw the old boiler room in another section of the basement. It provided heat for the house but had a second purpose. This boiler also piped warmth all the way to the back yard to what was known as the first heated/covered private swimming pool in El Paso. As legend has it, the basement bowling lane was two feet shorter than a regular bowling alley lane. This was due to the backyard pool being in the way (Don't you just hate it when your heated pool is in the way of your bowling alley?). As gracious hosts, they also showed me the walk-in basement safe, connected by another path, and allowed me to stand inside it. Made of concrete, it felt impenetrable. Water damage had rusted over the doors, but they were still fortified as ever. We then walked to the carriage house located in the back yard. I saw remnants of where the pool heating pipes had once been attached to a brick wall outlying the property. The owners explained that they had to fill in the pool, as it was too dangerous and costly to repair. Luckily Naomi had taken a picture of the pool before it was filled, and she shared the image with me.

Upon arriving at the carriage house, John unlocked and opened its doors. Scattered throughout were various parts of the Hoffecker house deemed for reclaim. Also laying on the floor were the actual doors to the second safe. The same safe that once resided on the second level of the carriage house. John explained that he had a heck of a time getting the massive steel doors from the second floor down to the first floor and how he had to use a special lift just to lower the doors to ground level. Jokingly, John stated the safe doors easily weighed 1,000 lbs. then talked about how he found the records hidden up top. John continued to point out the vertical boards beneath the original location of the safe and remarked that they must have been placed to support the massive amount of weight. I joked about how it was probably full of coins and that I too would have added extra support. I then told the couple that, allegedly up in that



(Left) House in upper left background, Jason Elwell at left, Hoffercker papers at center, John Falvey at right.

(Right) Newly discovered Hoffercker papers in trunk of car.

loft, was where the original plaster molds for the Old Spanish Trail half dollar were created.

After all was done, we took a couple of quick pictures to document this amazing find and then moved the files from his vehicle to mine. I will add that the sun was in our faces so both John and I couldn't even see the screen and struggled to keep our eyes open for the picture. I thanked John and Naomi Falvey for the great honor. The great honor of being able to walk in the footsteps of numismatic history and the great honor of receiving the Hoffercker files, noting that the files will be of great scholarly importance. Later, I would find out just how important they were.

THE FILES

Sitting for roughly 70 years after Hoffercker's death, these files awaited rescue. As the second floor of the back carriage house on the Hoffercker estate is accessible only by special ladder or lift, these files must have been missed by the B. Max Mehl, Fort Worth Texas Mail Bid Sale #115 held November 30, 1954, and the Superior Galleries L.W. Hoffercker Collection and other Important Properties Auction and Mail Bid Sale held on February 8-11, 1987.

It was noted in the 1987 Superior Galleries Hoffercker Auction Catalog: Lot# 4631 that there was "a box full" of Hoffercker's correspondence from the 1930's and 1950's. In David Q. Bowers' book Commemorative Coins of the United States, there is a mention of "200 letters" from the "Hoffercker-Correspondence Files Bowers and Merena Galleries Reference Collection". I wonder if those "200 letters" are from that "one (1) box" of effects sold in 1987. I also wonder how that paperwork would compare to the three boxes of papers and one box of artifacts now in my possession. It has been a longstanding belief that all original

belongings of L.W. Hoffercker were sold in 1954 and 1987. The discovery of these additional files rewrites that narrative and must be acknowledged.

As I scoured through the files, it was very apparent that the local pigeons of the old Hoffercker estate liked these files and dropped their gratitude all over them. Being exposed to the arid high-desert air, extreme heat, cold, and the occasional roof leak, did no additional favors for these papers. As the Hoffercker files were now sitting in modern boxes thanks to the new homeowners, I imagine the old boxes gave the ultimate sacrifice by taking the brunt of what 70 plus years had to offer. Going through the papers, everything seemed so brittle. Many papers were connected by pins rather than staples. Some papers had already broken from their pin and other papers had jagged edges from being too brittle. Small pieces could be found in the bottom of the boxes. With all that against them, the last of the Hoffercker files survived.

As I flipped through the documents, I noticed a pattern. Most files are dated 1950 and 1952, but there are some documents from the 1930's and 1940's. Often when typing a new document, Hoffercker would use the back of an older document. I don't know if this was to conserve paper, create a copy for himself, or reduce file storage. Either way it gives me a glimpse into Hoffercker's much earlier years. As I kept going through the old files, it was apparent that there was a folder that held much different information. As I started to go through this special folder labeled "Numismatist" my eyes widened. What I was reading was going to re-write the textbooks. Standing with these old documents in hand, I couldn't help but think about the possibility that Hoffercker had stored these files with hopes that someone someday would let his truth be known.

Look for the next issue of TNA News: Go Tell it on the Franklin Mountains ... L.W. Hoffercker is Reborn! In part 2 of 4, I will go into detail about the history of the Old Spanish Trail (El Paso) half dollar and address comments about it. Be on the lookout for the next issue of TNA News!

PHOTO CAPTIONS

(1) Basement boiler for Hoffercker House and backyard pool

(2) Hoffercker's heated backyard pool

(3) Hoffercker House basement safe, closed

(4) Hoffercker House basement safe, main door and interior double doors open

(5) Hoffercker House's Carriage House second floor safe, first door closed

(6) Hoffercker House's Carriage House second floor safe, first door open and second door closed



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